

Tiananmen i

The world is waiting to see if Mikhail Gorbachev will do to Vilnius what Deng Xiao Peng did to Tiananmen Square. It is hugely ironic that Mr. Gorbachev should arrive at this point of stalemate in Lithuania, one of those small Baltic countries that dropped down the West's memory hole. For decades, a small group of anti-Communists were considered quaint when they referred to these three Soviet republics as the "captured nations." Now the world is transfixed by little Lithuania's fate, which in turn could set the course of Mr. Gorbachev's own future.

The Soviet president can either crush Lithuania or let it go free. Barring an improbable decision by the Lithuanians themselves to stand down

from their streak toward independence, we see no middle way. When he set the forces of glasnost and perestroika in motion, Mr. Gorbachev may have hoped that he could preserve the far-flung Stalinist empire. Later, when it became apparent that the forces of democracy were centrifugal, he may have wished to manage the changes on his schedule and with new boundaries of his choosing. But in our time, empires don't unwind or dissolve, they explode.

The detonator is the global telecommunications system. Mr. Gorbachev may have mastered the use of this phenomenon to create his persona in the West, but like all the rest of us he surely does not understand its full force. Nor did he understand the democratic message it was transmitting. Even in Mongolia, of all places, there not only is a democracy movement, but it has already held an election to turn the Communists out of office. If indeed Mr. Gorbachev and his colleagues decide to impede the Lithuanians by force, will they then wheel the Red Army east to manhandle the Mongolians? And then west to the Ukraine? In the south, they have al-

n in Vilnius?

ready staged a dress rehearsal for a Tiananmen Square in Georgia and Azerbaijan.

Mr. Gorbachev has asked the fragmenting pieces of his empire to give him time. And by and large the governments of Europe and the United States have sided with him, accepting the argument that the bright and clever Mr. Gorbachev is the West's best hope of effecting a soft landing for this historic upheaval. But today, it is not a feasible request to make of the Soviets' subjects.

The Lithuanians, Estonians and Ukrainians can't wait. They have seen the future—democratic capitalism—and they know perfectly well that it works. Their neighbors in Eastern Europe are already hard at work liberal-

izing their economies for integration with the West's system.

The Chinese Politburo saw clearly that there was no third way between permitting the modern onrush to democracy and simply crushing the movement, while the world screams.

China's Communists have decided for now to simply withdraw from the

world, somehow taking a billion people with them. From where the Chinese Communists sit, it is a policy of grim logic, but to the world it seems a fantastic and preposterous act.

It's not clear that Mr. Gorbachev even has the Chinese option. The genie that glasnost released isn't going to be bottled up again, at least not short of a civil war. And while we can't fathom the purposes of the Soviet leadership, we're inclined to believe they'd prefer not to play the Tiananmen card in Vilnius. In our view that leaves one option: Let the empire go. They simply cannot hold on to it without losing Stalinist coercion from its crypt.

Let however many of the 14 republics depicted in the accompanying map choose their own destinies. What remains is the great land mass of the Russian republic and its 145 million people. Reforming the Russian republic to whatever the real design of perestroika may be is more than enough for a man of even Mr. Gorbachev's skills. In that sense, the Lithuanians are doing Mr. Gorbachev a favor. The test of his talents now is in finding some way to recognize their contribution.